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‘People like me don’t have much of a chance in life’: comparing the locus of control of young people in foster care with that of adoptees, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children in the general population

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Abstract

There is a paucity of research on the locus of control of children and young people growing up in foster care in England. Based on secondary analyses of data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), this article explores the locus of control of fostered young people during adolescence compared to those in adoptive care, those growing up in disadvantaged circumstances and young people in the general population. As the questions asked of the young people in the LSYPE did not form part of a standardised locus of control scale, the dimensionality of the items was first verified through a principal components analysis (PCA). The fostered young people scored significantly higher on external locus of control items compared to those in adopted and general population groups, and were similar to young people in the disadvantaged group. Reasons for the high external scores in the fostered group and implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Keywords

Locus of control, foster care, adoption

Introduction

We all have different perceptions regarding the degree to which we have control over events and outcomes in our lives. The term 'locus of control' was first coined by Julian Rotter in the context of his social learning theory to explain these differing types of control orientations that individuals hold (Rotter, 1954; 1966). He argues that individuals with an internal locus of control generally believe that life events and outcomes in their lives are a result of their own actions and behaviours, whereas those with an external locus of control are more likely to believe that life events and outcomes are shaped by external forces, such as fate, luck or chance. Later theorists, who built upon Rotter's ideas (Levenson, 1975; Wallston, et al., 1976), conceptualised that individuals with an external locus of control can be further divided into two subgroups: (1) those who believe that their life's outcomes are a result of fate, luck or chance; and (2) those who believe that these outcomes are beyond their control due to the decisions and actions of others who are more powerful than them. Locus of control is formed through an individual's interaction with his or her environment (Ahlin and Lobo Antunes, 2015; Rotter, 1971) and an internal locus of control is established when a person's behaviours or efforts lead to desirable and consistent results or rewards over time. The individual then builds an expectancy that the same behaviours or efforts will lead to similar outcomes in the future. Conversely, an external locus of control is established when individuals fail in spite of their efforts or feel that they are not in control of the events and outcomes in their lives (Rotter, 1966; Twenge, Zhang and Im, 2004).

Although individuals tend to display one orientation or the other, locus of control is not a dichotomous personal attribute. In some situations when the outcome of an event is dependent on one's own decisions and behaviours as well as those of others, both orientations can be held simultaneously (Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton, 2005; Wallston and Wallston, 1982). An example is when an individual is ill. He or she may consult a doctor in the belief that the advice and prescriptions (action of a powerful person) will alleviate the problem, but they also need to take responsibility for purchasing the medicine and taking it as directed.

Furthermore, the locus of control is not static. It can change over time or be situation dependent (Rotter, 1966; Ryon and Gleason, 2014). For example, if imprisoned, individuals' locus of control can become more externalised due to their decision-making powers having been removed by powerful others such as prison officers (Huntley, Palmer and Wakeling, 2012). Research suggests that individuals with a bias towards an internal locus of control enjoy better health and well-being. Decreased risks of obesity and hypertension have been linked to an internal locus of control in childhood (Gale, Batty and Deary, 2008). Such children tend to be self-efficacious, adaptable and more positive about change (Gilmor, 1978). They are also more likely to achieve better results in academic tests (Wang, et al., 1999), have better psychological well-being overall (Ward and Kennedy,

1992) and show greater resilience in the face of adversity (Jackson and Martin, 1998). It has further been linked with an enhanced ability to cope in stressful situations and with reduction in aggressive behaviours (Wallace, et al., 2012) and offending (Kelley, 1996).

Since locus of control is affected by a person's interactions with the environment, it follows that the locus of control of children will be influenced by their rearing environments. For those who are no longer able to live with their birth parents and are looked after by the state, it is likely that changes to their initial rearing environments will affect their locus of control expectations.

Young people in foster care in England

Currently, in England, there are just over 70,000 children being looked after by the state, with three-quarters of them in foster placements (Department for Education, 2016). Most enter state care carrying many risks to optimal development (Selwyn and Quinton, 2004) as they come from disadvantaged households, often exacerbated by domestic abuse, parental criminality and concerns regarding parental mental health and substance misuse (Schofield, et al., 2000). Consequently, more than half (54%) of children and young people enter care due to abuse, neglect or both (Department for Education, 2016). The experience of maltreatment has been linked to insecure attachment patterns (Cyr, et al., 2010) and recent studies comparing outcomes for previously maltreated children show that fostered children and young people are less securely attached to their carers compared to their adopted contemporaries (Biehal, Ellison and Sinclair, 2009). This can affect children's adaptation to new situations, their interpersonal relationships and their self-worth (Cicchetti and Toth, 1995), all of which are intrinsically related to their locus of control (Rotter, 1971).

Maltreatment also puts children at a higher risk of developing mental health and other health-related problems. It has a negative impact on their sense of self and creates difficulties with the recognition and regulation of emotions, which could lead to disruptive interactions with peers and an increased risk of personality and other psychiatric disorders (Cicchetti, 2016), all of which may affect their perceived control over life events and hence their locus of control.

Once in care, many children experience further upheaval and instability as they move between foster placements (Sinclair, et al., 2007). Most recent statistics show that nearly a third (31%) of the children in care experience one or more placement changes, i.e. changes to their primary caregiver, every year (Department for Education, 2016). These discontinuities are almost certain to determine how much young people feel in control of their lives and, consequently, their locus of control.

Fostered young people and locus of control

Research in the US has found that children and young people who live in substitute care are more likely to show a bias towards an external locus of control (Sun, 2003). Another study found that girls in foster care have an external locus of control, indicative of lower perceived personal control over their lives (Wiehe, 1987). A survey of adults who have previously been in care in the UK showed that the 'high achievers' (defined in the study as adults in further or higher education) have a more internal locus of control compared to those who are not (Jackson and Martin, 1998). However, these research studies did not explore whether the locus of control of children and young people in care differs from their peers in the general population or from those who have experienced alternative types of substitute care. With most decisions regarding placements or contact with birth families being made on behalf of them, it could be argued that children and young people in foster care do not have much control over their rearing environments and that the role of 'powerful others' becomes paramount in their lives. Thus, it can be hypothesised that children and young people in state care will have a bias towards an external locus of control compared to their peers not in care. Therefore, the aim of this article is to explore the locus of control of fostered young people in England compared with young people in adoptive care, those growing up in disadvantaged circumstances and young people in the general population.

A general population comparison group was deemed important as it enables a comparison between fostered young people's locus of control with that of their peers. However, in order to establish if foster care *per se* has had an effect on the young people's locus of control, comparisons were made with two other groups: disadvantaged young people not in care but whose background characteristics are similar to those of looked after children's birth families (based on criteria adapted from Bebbington and Miles, 1989) and those who have gone on to be adopted. The analysis was carried out as part of a larger study undertaken to explore the transition to adulthood for adoptees, which has been reported elsewhere (Wijedasa and Selwyn, 2011).

Method

The data for this article were derived from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) (Department for Children, Schools and Families and National Centre for Social Research, 2010). This study, also referred to as 'Next Steps', began in 2004, with a representative sample of 15,770 young people aged 13–14 years attending maintained and independent schools or pupil referral units in England. Its primary aim was to identify and understand the critical factors affecting young people's transition from secondary school to tertiary education/training and their subsequent entry into the labour market. At present, data from seven waves of data collection (2004–2010) have been

released. Information has been gathered on the young person's family background, parental socio-economic status and employment, as well as their attitudes, experiences, behaviours and educational and economic outcomes. Face-to-face interviews with parents or carers were also carried out during the first four waves of data collection.

Samples

At wave 1, the LSYPE included 55 foster children (excluding those in kinship foster care) and 34 adopted children (excluding young people who had been adopted by their step-parents, relatives and via intercountry adoption). These two groups of young people comprised the fostered and adopted samples. From a sampling frame of 1,386 disadvantaged young people – defined as those living with single mothers with low educational qualifications (i.e. lower than GCSE) and on low-income benefits – 55 young people were randomly selected for the living in disadvantaged circumstances group. The rest comprised the general population sample. As there was some attrition by the time of the second wave of data collection, the final samples considered in this article consisted of 36 young people in foster care, 31 in adoptive care, 33 in the disadvantaged group and 13,406 in the general population comparison.

Measures and analyses

During wave 2, young people were asked to respond to seven locus of control type statements on whether they thought events in their life were more within or outside their control. The scores ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Although the seven statements in the LSYPE were similar to items on a locus of control scale, they were not derived from a standardised scale. Therefore, they were first tested to confirm that they were measuring locus of control. To enable this, a principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was conducted to verify the dimensionality of the seven items. Once dimensionality was established as measuring internal and external locus of control, the seven items were binary coded (disagree/agree) to enable further analyses. Differences between the groups of young people were explored with Rao-Scott chi-square tests and odds ratios. A Bonferroni correction was applied to allow for multiple comparisons. As the LSYPE had a complex sampling design, all analyses were weighted using the SPSS complex samples module.

Results

Characteristics of the young people

All the young people were in Year 10 at school (14–15 years of age) at the time of the second wave of the LSYPE data collection. As can be seen in Table 1, gender and ethnicity distributions of the fostered group were similar to those of the national population of looked after children in England (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2005).

Table 1. Characteristics of the young people at the second wave of data collection of the LSYPE.

	Weighted survey sample (%)			National statistics* (%)	
	Fostered (n = 37)	Adopted (n = 34)	Disadvantaged (n = 33)	General population (n = 15,535)	Looked after child population in 2004 (N = 61,100)
Gender					
Male	59	57	59	50	55
Female	41	43	41	50	45
Ethnicity					
White	79	87	74	87	80
Black	7	8	4	3	8
Asian	2	1	10	5	2
Mixed	12	4	6	3	8
Other	0	0	6	2	2

*Compared with 2004 statistics to enable comparability of the data (Department for Children Schools and Families, 2005)

Data on the total number of placements in care experienced by the fostered young people were not available. However, 50% of them had experienced failed reunifications with their birth families (range 2–15 times) and more than half (59%) had been older than 10 years when placed with their current foster carers (Mean= 10.3 years, SE= 0.51, Range= 0–14.8 years). Thirty percent of the adopted young people had also experienced failed reunifications with their birth families (range 2–11 times) and 40% of them were less than a year old when placed with their adoptive parents (Mean= 1.8 years, SE= 0.36, Range= 0–9 years).

Significantly more (48%) young people in the fostered group had special educational needs compared with those in the general population (12%), the disadvantaged group (26%) and the adopted group (23%) (Rao-Scott chi-square test $p < .001$). A higher proportion of those fostered (30%) were also

likely to report a disability compared with those who were adopted (19%), disadvantaged (15%) and in the general population (15%) (Rao-Scott chi-square test $p < .001$).

Verifying the dimensionality of the locus of control items

As explained earlier, the dimensionality of seven items as measuring internal and external locus of control was verified through a PCA with varimax rotation. The internal items were reverse coded so that higher scores indicated more external locus of control (Wallston, et al., 1976). All individual Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin values were above the accepted .5 level and the correlation between the items was large enough for PCA (Bartlett's test of sphericity, $\chi^2(21) = 4886.56$, $p < .0001$). This exercise confirmed that the seven locus of control type statements in wave 2 of the LSYPE can be divided into two sub-components: internal and external locus of control. The rotated component matrix with suppressed loadings of less than .4 is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Rotated component matrix of the seven items on locus of control.*

Items	Components	
	1 (Internal)	2 (External)
If you work hard at something you'll usually succeed	.692	
Working hard at school now will help me get on later in life	.672	
If someone is not a success in life it is usually their own fault	.604	
I can pretty much decide what will happen in my life	.523	
People like me don't have much of a chance in life		.742
How well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck		.712
Even if I do well at school, I'll have a hard time getting the right kind of job		.663

* Extraction method: Principal Component Analysis

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalisation. Rotation converged in three iterations.

Internal and external locus of control of young people in foster care

Having established that the seven items in the LSYPE were measuring internal and external locus of control, it would then have been desirable to use the total scores of internal and external sub-scales to compare the locus of control of the four groups of young people. However, the reliability of the seven items, when considered as a scale, as measured by Cronbach's Alpha, was only an average 0.52.

Alpha is affected by the number of items on a scale and therefore, the reliability of the scale may have been affected by the low number of items considered (Streiner, 2003). Given the average reliability of the scale, it was decided not to use the scale scores for further analysis but to scrutinise the proportions of young people from the four study groups who agreed with each of the internal and external locus of control items. The differences between the four groups of young people were explored through Rao-Scott chi-square analyses, with a Bonferroni correction, which adjusted the p-value for multiple comparisons (see Table 3).

Table 3. Agreement with statements on locus of control.

	Adopted n = 28 to 30	Fostered n = 30 to 32	Disadvantaged n = 27 to 30	General population n = 11,418 to 12,789
Internal locus of control				
If you work hard at something you'll usually succeed	95%	93%	93%	95%
Working hard at school now will help me get on later in life	89%	97%	99%	96%
If someone is not a success in life it is usually their own fault	65%	67%	74%	65%
I can pretty much decide what will happen in my life	66%	72%	62%	68%
External locus of control				
People like me don't have much of a chance in life ***	15%	29%	28%	10%
How well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck***	9%	42%	54%	23%
Even if I do well at school, I'll have a hard time getting the right kind of job	54%	65%	52%	42%

The n varies as not all children answered all 7 questions:

*** Rao-Scott chi-square test, $p < .001$ (Bonferroni correction applied for multiple comparisons)

As can be seen in Table 3, young people in all groups reported high agreement with internal locus of control items and the differences between groups did not reach statistical significance. On the other hand, there was a significant association between group membership and agreement with two of the items tapping into external locus of control: 'People like me don't have much of a chance in life' and 'How well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck' (both Rao-Scott chi-square tests,

$p < .001$). In order to take the analysis further and measure the extent to which the groups differed from each other, odds ratios were calculated with the general population as the comparison group to explore the size of the differences between the groups. The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

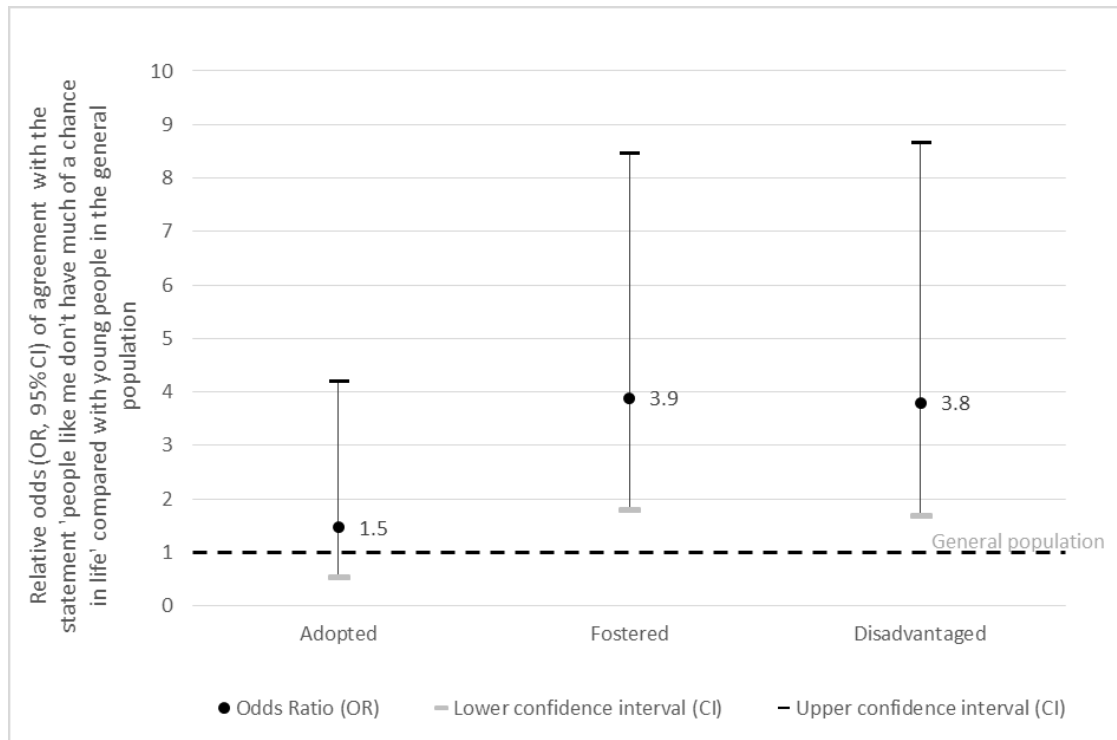


Figure 1. Relative odds of agreement with the statement ‘People like me don’t have much of a chance in life’ compared with young people in the general population.

Odds ratios indicate the likelihood of the fostered, adopted or disadvantaged groups agreeing with the statements when compared with the responses of their contemporaries in the general population. As shown in Figure 1, when compared to young people in the general population, those fostered were nearly four times more likely to agree with the statement ‘People like me don’t have much of a chance in life’. They were also more than twice as likely to agree with ‘How well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck’ (Figure 2). It is interesting to note that adopted young people were only one-and-a-half times more likely than young people in the general population to agree with the first statement and that they were less likely than their general population peers to agree with the second. On the other hand, young people in the disadvantaged group were nearly four times more likely to agree with both statements when compared to young people in the general population.

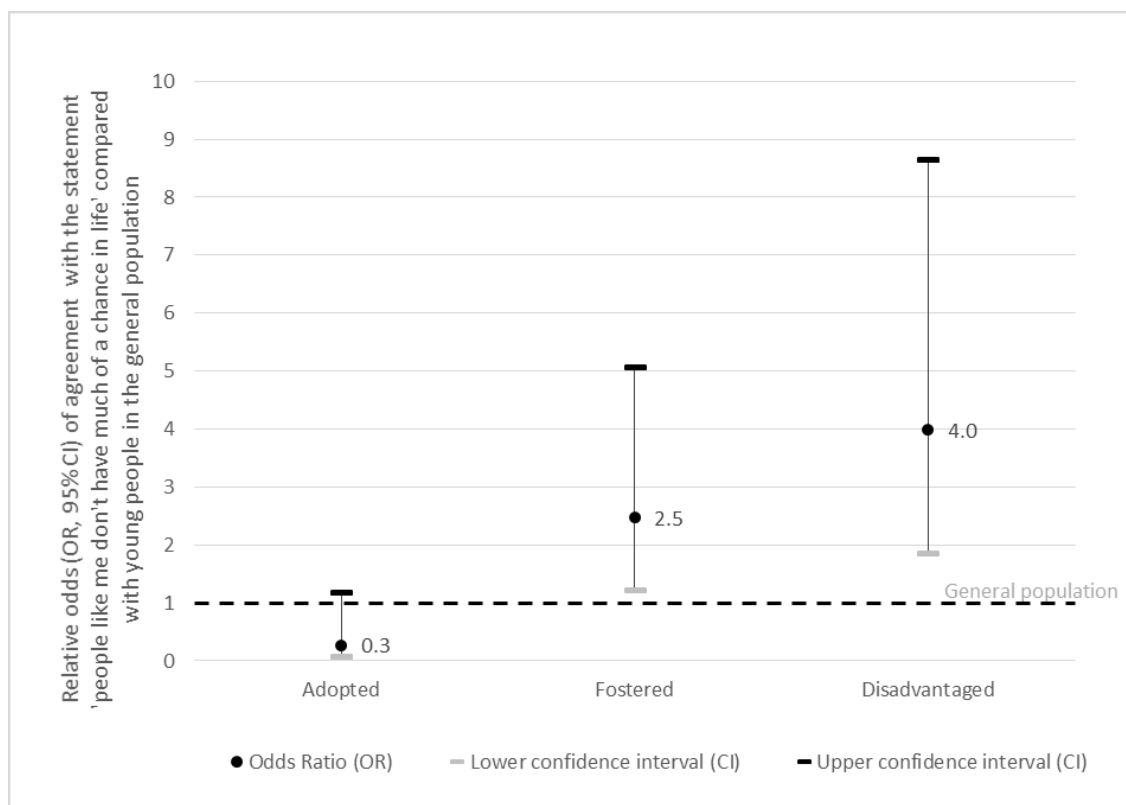


Figure 2. Relative odds of agreement with the statement ‘How well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck’ compared with young people in the general population.

Discussion

The aim of this article was to explore the locus of control of fostered young people in comparison to those in adoptive care, those growing up in disadvantaged circumstances and young people in the general population. The results discussed should be considered within the limitations of its exploratory nature and the small sample sizes of the fostered, adopted and disadvantaged groups of young people in the LSYPE. The analyses also did not control for other variables that may have an impact on the locus of control, for example, socio-economic status or self-esteem, as data on these were not available. However, the results still set the scene for a discussion of the locus of control of fostered young people in England, when compared to those in the other three groups.

It is not surprising to find that all the young people, including those in foster care, agreed with both the internal and the external locus of control items. Previous research indicates that individuals are able to hold internal as well as external locus of control expectations simultaneously (Anderson, Hattie and Hamilton, 2005; Wallston and Wallston, 1982). On the other hand, the fostered group were significantly more likely to hold external locus of control beliefs than their peers in the general

population and their adopted contemporaries. Only the disadvantaged young people had a higher agreement than those fostered regarding the external locus items.

Children and young people are taken into care when they are not able to remain at home. For some, this is a positive change that can transform their lives through stable, abuse-free family care (Wilson, et al., 2004). However, the results indicate that despite their shared histories prior to coming into care, fostered young people are more likely than adoptees to agree with the external locus of control items. This implies that the status of being either fostered or adopted has an impact on the responses. Given the legal finality afforded by adoption, adoptees do not experience the multiple changes to their rearing environment that are common among fostered children. These differing experiences may have contributed to the contrasts in the locus of control expectations between the adopted and fostered groups.

Looked after children are more likely to have special educational needs (Sinclair, et al., 2007), which was found to be the case for 48% of the fostered group in this study. Locus of control is dependent neither solely on the individual nor the environment, and feelings of control and power result from the opportunities that arise when individuals with different genetic dispositions interact within various environments (Rutter, 1987; Prilleltensky, Nelson and Peirson, 2001). To be able to exert control over their environment, an individual needs to extract information, sift through it to differentiate what is useful, have the capacity to formulate a course of action and then act accordingly (Bar-Tal and Bar-Zohar, 1977). The presence of special educational needs may have affected young people's cognitive capacities and, hence, the direction of their locus of control.

Lack of permanence in the lives of fostered young people may also be an important contributory factor. Half of those in this study had experienced failed reunifications with birth families and although the data were not available, it is likely that they had been through several placement changes while in care. This instability may have led them to formulate a bias towards an external locus of control which, once established, can further exacerbate the long-term impact of the stress and distress faced by looked after children who experience multiple moves (Li and Chung, 2009).

About a third of the fostered young people agreed with the statement 'People like me don't have much of a chance in life', which implies that they believed that the status of being fostered limits their opportunities. A study which explored the identities of a cross-section of 52 fostered children found that half of them worried about their futures in terms of accommodation, court hearings and school moves (McMurray, et al., 2011). The identity of fostered young people in society is also somewhat negatively constructed, with stigma being attached to growing up in a family structure that is not 'normal' (Schofield, 2002). Indeed, positive portrayals of life in foster care by the media are rare.

As the rearing environment affects the locus of control of fostered young people, it is also likely that it will be influenced by the locus of control of the foster carers, who do not have parental rights and have only limited authority over some aspects of the children's lives.

Implications for policy and practice

As locus of control is malleable and changeable over the life course, a promising practice initiative would be to develop ways of changing the external locus of control beliefs held by some young people in foster care. Children may feel more empowered and build a sense of control: (1) through close positive association with adults who are empowered; (2) by nurturing their sense of identity through kin, ethnic heritage and religious traditions; and (3) by participating in the decisions that affect them (Hegar, 1989).

Close positive associations with adults who are empowered

For children who are fostered, a stable 'home away from home' in the care system can potentially provide a secure base to spend time with positive role models with whom they can form secure attachments, nurture positive identities, deal with stigma, build self-esteem and learn to trust other people (Schofield, 2002). Long-term placement stability may, in turn, make children and young people feel more in control of their lives and outcomes, as suggested by the responses of the adoptees in this study. It is important to identify and establish policies and practices that could improve decision-making and permanency for children in foster care, as this may address the lack of power and control in the children's lives brought about by the constant moves.

Given that the locus of control of children and young people is affected by their relationship with primary carers, it may also be shifted through the empowerment of foster carers. Recent efforts have been made to achieve this through the launch of the Foster Carers' Charter (Fostering Network, 2016) and also by mandating the statutory duty of the local authority to consider delegated parental responsibility so that foster carers can make day-to-day decisions on behalf the children they look after. Section 3.192 of *The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations* (Department for Education, 2015: 92) states that:

. . . it is essential to fulfilling the local authority's duty to safeguard and promote the child's welfare that, wherever possible, the most appropriate person to take a decision about the child has the authority to do so, and that there is clarity about who has authority to decide what.

However, the delegation of authority is only straightforward in instances where the local authority holds a care order or an emergency protection order on behalf of the child. The local authority cannot delegate authority to foster carers for children voluntarily accommodated under section 20 of the

Children Act 1989 as the parental responsibility remains with the birth parents. Social workers need to be made more aware of how delegated authority could be used to empower foster carers, as this may, in turn, have a positive impact on the children's perceptions of the locus of control.

Further considering the importance of the rearing environment and primary caregivers, more emphasis could also be placed on the longevity of foster parenting. Foster carers act on behalf of the state to provide safe and nurturing accommodation for children and some continue to treat young people as part of their family even when formal arrangements have ceased (Schofield, 2003). Sadly, this is not the case for most fostered young people, with only 19% of care leavers experiencing the stability of the same placement for five years or more (Sinclair, et al., 2007). Given that most fostered young people lack roots in an established family system that would nurture them through to adulthood, the transition from care to independent living should be planned in such a way that those leaving foster care do not feel that they will have to cope alone. This is especially so given that a recent research study found that a third of the young people felt they were given no choice but to leave care (Dixon, et al., 2015). Over recent years, government policy (Quality Protects Programme; Right2BCared4; Care2work; Staying Put) and legal changes (the Children Leaving Care Act 2000) have tried to delay young people's transition from care, but despite these efforts, in 2016 only 3% of the 19-year-olds previously looked after were still living with their foster carers (Department for Education, 2016).

Enabling a sense of control by nurturing a sense of identity

Children in care may also feel more empowered and build a sense of control by nurturing their sense of identity through contact with birth families and life story work (Hegar, 1989). Research indicates that if contact is well supported and managed by social workers, it can contribute to children's overall sense of well-being and the development of a positive identity (Haight Kagle and Black, 2003; Poulin, 1992). Despite these suggested benefits, other research studies caution that contact arrangements with birth families need to be carefully monitored, reassessed and revisited on a regular basis to ensure that they are in the child's best interests and support the young person to understand the past and move on (Boyle, 2015; Moyers, Farmer and Lipscombe, 2006; Selwyn, 2004; Sen and Broadhurst, 2011).

When contact with the birth family is not in the best interests of the child, coherent and co-constructed life story work often helps the child to construct their past, which in turn will assist them to develop a sense of self and identity (Watson, Latter and Bellew, 2015). Maintaining a continued sense of self and identity despite the placement and family changes that foster care sometimes entails, may provide the buffer that children and young people in care need to acquire a sense of perceived control.

Gilligan's work (1999) shows that enabling the creation of social relationships through sporting, cultural or other activities for children in care can build resilience and have a positive impact on children's self-esteem and mental health. Activities and interests that are not directly linked to a foster

placement or a care plan can provide a constant, but mobile, protective system for children who may experience instability in all other areas of their lives. As locus of control is malleable and has been described as a trait as well as a state dependent variable (Ryon and Gleason, 2014), it is possible that the constant and protective identity formed through relationships and interests outside the care system might enable the young people to hone an internal locus of control.

Enabling participation in the decisions that affect them

A recent research study which surveyed children from across the world shows that children place a high value on having their voices heard, and having more choice and a greater say over life choices (Rees, Bradshaw and Andersen, 2016) and Article 12 of the UNCRC mandates the requirement for respecting the views of the child (United Nations, 1989). Furthermore, section 1 of the Children Act 1989 emphasises the requirement to consider the wishes and feelings of the children in proceedings and section 26A imposes duty on local authorities in respect of the provision of advocacy services, not only in the instances where a child wishes to make a complaint, but also in situations where children and young people would like to voice their concerns about the quality of care they receive (Department for Education, 2015). Additionally, the Ofsted framework now takes into consideration how children's wishes and feelings have been incorporated in child protection discussions. However, research studies show that many foster children still feel that they are not involved in the decisions that are being made on behalf of them and that some are not aware of their rights (Buchanan, 1995; Fletcher, 1993; Lansdown, 1995; Timms and Thoburn, 2006), both of which would have an impact on their locus of control. Therefore, including the voices and preferences of children in decisions that affect them could lead to the development of an internal locus of control, which would be reinforced when the outcomes of the decisions are desirable for the children, consistently over time.

At any given point in time, there are more than 50,000 children in foster care in England. The evidence emerging from this study indicates that it is imperative for attention to be given to improving the perceived control of these children and young people. This can be done by ensuring stable placements and through the empowerment and enrichment of everyone in the fostering triad: social workers, foster carers and children. An effective care system not only provides safe accommodation, but also the love, nurture, encouragement and positive reinforcement that every child needs to build a sense of perceived control. Although this aspect of their care experience may have been somewhat overlooked in discussions about children's wishes and feelings, it will have a significant impact on their future prospects and outcomes.

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